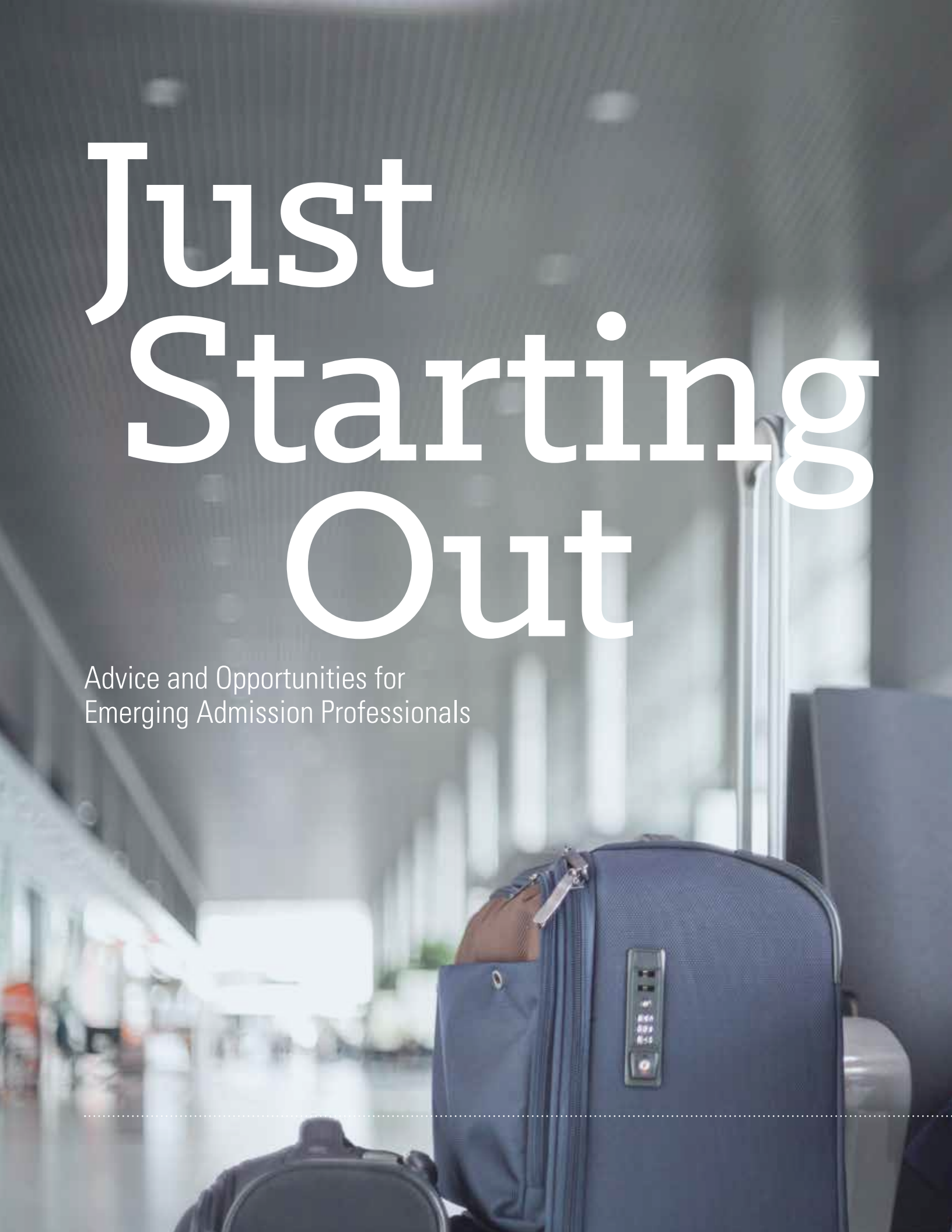


Just Starting Out

Advice and Opportunities for
Emerging Admission Professionals





By Carol Patton

Whether it's your first day or first year on the job as an admission counselor at a university or college, you may be struggling with balancing the demands of your job with family needs, positioning yourself for advancement, or finding valuable programs that offer growth opportunities.

You're not alone. Every generation of admission counselors at higher education institutions has experienced similar challenges and asked the same questions. How can I juggle all my responsibilities on this road trip? How do I creatively reach out to students? Is this job right for me?

Career success and longevity in the admission field isn't mysterious or even complicated. Experienced administrators across the country, many who started out as admission counselors, often cite numerous reasons behind their professional growth and accomplishments. However, some believe three practices are key to helping newcomers survive and thrive in their job: observe work-life balance to avoid burnout; cast a wide net to take advantage of resources, tools, and networking opportunities, both on and off campus; and break out of your silo to develop new skills, experiences, and professional relationships beyond the world of admission.

STARTING POINT

After serving 25 years in the industry, Terry Knaus, college counselor at Cathedral High School in Indianapolis, believes some new counselors initially work in the dark.

"Oftentimes, when new professionals come in, (they) don't really know what's expected of them, especially when they're out on the road," he said, adding that he previously served 17 years in admission at Indiana University. "Get support from your office. Experienced staff can help you through the process, educating you about what the profession is all about, what your responsibilities are and expectations."

In many cases, counselors aren't much older than high school students, which can pose awkward situations. He said some counselors get caught up with fitting in and hang out with the same students they're trying to recruit.

Big mistake. As a representative of your school, he said professionalism is the top priority. How you present information; speak to educators, students, or families; and follow through on requests generally reveals a lot about who you are and the character of your school.

So does punctuality.

"Our office saying is: 'Early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable,'" said Knaus. "That means when asked to give a presentation to a group of students on campus at 11 a.m., don't show up at 10:50 a.m. Show up 15–20 minutes ahead of time to help greet them and don't be afraid to stay afterward."

Likewise, seek opportunities to interact with students, staff, or administrators. If they request information that you're unfamiliar with—such as the specifics about a business program—don't wait to respond until you've returned from a road trip two weeks later. Follow through that evening or the next day. That will help you build and maintain professional relationships. You'll quickly develop a reputation as someone who can be trusted, is efficient and well organized, and values people's time. According to Knaus, this is one area that some emerging admission professionals flunk.

One reason may be due work-life balance issues. Road trips, especially those lasting several weeks, are typically exhausting.

To better position yourself for advancement, constantly improve your knowledge, experiences, and skills. One effective way is to find mentors throughout different stages in your life or career.

"When you come back from the road, make sure you have down time or personal time to rejuvenate," said Beverly Henry Wheeler, regional director of admission at Hendrix College in Dallas.

Take at least 30 minutes out of each day to relax, she said. Do yoga. Meditate. Exercise. Read a book. Call a friend. Listen to music. Visit a local attraction. There are plenty of options. Explore activities you consider fun or relaxing and then integrate them into your daily lifestyle. Always keep in mind that this job is a marathon, not a sprint, she said, which can help avoid burn out.

MINDSET, MENTORS, AND MONTHLY REVIEWS

It may take several road trips to the same location before people and places become familiar and comfortable, which positively changes the experience. After repeatedly visiting high schools in Chicago, for example, you now look forward to eating lunch or dinner at a favorite restaurant you discovered on your first trip. Some counselors make it a habit to visit local tourist attractions or favorite spots in between school meetings or job fairs.

While engaging in stress-free activities lends balance to a chaotic work schedule, your career also needs some checks and balances.

"Make sure you have your directives and time for a review," added Wheeler, suggesting monthly performance reviews with your boss. "Ask, 'Am I doing well? What do I need to change?' Have a conversation of ideas and growth so you see yourself not just as a roadrunner, but as a professional growing in a career."

To better position yourself for advancement, constantly improve your knowledge, experiences, and skills. One effective way is to find mentors throughout different stages in your life or career. Seek out people whose characteristics you admire—either inside or outside the profession—who will challenge you and hold you accountable, said Wheeler, adding that NACAC supports a professional mentoring program. Then reciprocate. Serve as a mentor for someone else who can benefit from your experiences.

Either way, be prepared to leave your comfort zone, said Eric Nichols, vice president for enrollment and dean of admission at Saint Anselm College (NH).

You may have been hired as an entry-level counselor and assigned a domestic territory to recruit first-year college students. Maybe there's an upcoming opportunity to learn more about transfer or international admission, help develop a communication plan for admission, or serve as a liaison with an athletic team. There are so many specialties just within admission that go way beyond the basics of travel and application reviews.

Some areas include event planning and developing social media strategies or marketing campaigns. He said these are just the tip of the iceberg.

"If you have a chance to work in an office where you can wear a lot of hats and get involved in different projects, do it," Nichols said. "That's the best way to move up—by exposing yourself to a lot of different aspects in admission. You might find that you have a skill set you didn't even know you had."

EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND INTERESTS

More than likely, you'll need to wait until your second year to perform stretch assignments or volunteer projects. The first year may be overwhelming. Early on, it's important to stay focused on performing your basic responsibilities.

Nichols believes it takes two full years to develop a realistic sense of the job. During the first year, he said counselors often spend eight to 10 weeks nonstop on the road, routinely read student applications or files, and then transition into student enrollment activities like planning open houses. By the time summer comes around, they're exhausted.

"A lot of counselors find their footing, have much more success, and feel more comfortable in their second year," Nichols said. "Even if you think the job isn't a perfect fit, it may not be the profession. Maybe being in a large office at a big university isn't for you. Maybe you'd thrive in a smaller office setting."

Meanwhile, gathering background information about school administrators before meeting with them can also enhance job success. Bryan Rothstein, associate director of admission at Adelphi University in New York, said before every meeting, he spends a lot of time researching administrators and their schools to make himself more "relatable."

"Walking in blind to a meeting with a principal or school counselor is not helpful usually," he said. "It almost makes you seem as if you're disorganized. Use this information as ice-breakers to show you're personable, one human being relating to another human being, that you're not a robot."

By stepping outside of your four walls, you can also develop a better understanding about higher education and industry opportunities. Take the initiative to join committees or perform tasks unrelated to your job that open windows into the world of higher education.

Rothstein, for instance, volunteered to serve on the school's diversity committee since he recruits diverse populations, and the technology committee, which helps coordinate the school's social media efforts and updates its website. He also joined NACAC and other industry-affiliated organizations to gain additional capabilities that would further advance his career. Over the years, he said he has made connections with counselors and other individuals around the world through NACAC's listservs.

"Don't silo yourself," he said. "Expressing an interest in something whether it's directly connected to your job or not can make you more marketable moving forward and help you continue to climb that career ladder. Make yourself multi-faceted."

STEPPING STONES

Planning a long-term career in admission is a little like playing chess. Sometimes, you need to accept lateral positions to ultimately capture your dream job. Take Rothstein. Back in 2013, he left his college job as a freshman admission counselor to join Adelphi as an assistant director of university admissions. Since then, he has been promoted twice—to senior director of university admission and once more to his current role.



"That was probably one of the best decisions I made," he said. "I don't think I would be where I am today without that move."

Still, there are other ways to achieve upward mobility. Years ago, while working as an admission counselor at Emerson College in Boston, Sara Brookshire, now director of admissions at Brandeis University (MA), traveled to different schools across the country.

During her down time, she toured local colleges, familiarizing herself with a wide variety of recruiting strategies used by other schools that could be applied at her own institution.

She also advised a new fashion club on campus. Despite her lack of interest in fashion, she helped the club's student members advocate for school resources, develop a budget for the academic year, create the club's constitution and governing principles, and taught them how to bid jobs out to vendors for campus events like fashion shows.

Learning occurred in both directions. She said she used this opportunity to not only help students in the club, but to also discover what they liked best about the school. If these students—or others in her department—raved about professors, she would sit in on their classes. If students were excited about an upcoming event, she would attend. She used their experiences as leverage when recruiting other students, which also enhanced her credibility as an ambassador for the institution.

Brookshire added that many NACAC affiliates also offer summer institute programs for new admission professionals.

"We have people coming to our institute on the first day of their job before they come to their office," said Brookshire, adding that NACAC also offers a free program called Emerging Admission Professionals in conjunction with National College Fairs. It targets individuals with less than three years of experience in the field, providing them with educational sessions and networking opportunities with industry professionals.

However, not every school's budget can accommodate conference requests from new staff. Use this time to strengthen your abilities and gain new experiences. Then several years into your career, consider adding another skill—workshop presenter—to your portfolio, Brookshire said. Talk at conferences about your area of expertise like the nuts and bolts of corralling alumni volunteers affiliated with the admission office.

Until then, take pride in your profession. You're in a unique position to positively change the lives of everyone you encounter.

"(This profession) isn't about the title or money," said Wheeler. "It's about the people. Make each individual you encounter feel like he or she is the only individual you encounter. If you can keep that as your guiding light, you won't get burned out." [🔗](#)

Carol Patton is an award-winning journalist in Las Vegas who covers education and other topics for many publications and websites.